

Giving back to the community

Why it makes sense

There are at least two good reasons for organizations to become involved in the community. First, the children of today are tomorrow's future. It makes good sense for businesses and organizations to support children's development and help the next generation of employees develop to their full potential.

Second, thriving communities are essential to all businesses, and thriving businesses are essential to all communities. Companies that develop ways to give back to the community through volunteer programs and charitable giving, strengthen the community, strengthen themselves, and enhance their own standing and image in the community.

Even with today's increased business competition and limited resources, companies that have targeted community involvement programs report that over time these programs pay for themselves in the form of more loyal and productive employees, as well as customers who feel good doing business with them.

Business and community partnerships

Norwest Bank, based in Minnesota, has two corporate offices in Maryland, one in Columbia and the other in Frederick. In addition to the company's commitment to the American Cancer Society and involvement with the United Way and its "Day of Caring" initiative, Norwest collaborates with Junior Achievement. During the 1999 school year, 35 Norwest employees from one of the work sites were given one hour a week out of their work day to tutor students at Running Brook Elementary School. Norwest also has a foundation, which accepts proposals from not-for-profit organizations throughout Maryland who support educational, health care, and children's issues. Employees are notified of funding opportunities, so that they can notify their organizations and interested agencies. Proposals are also solicited from the community. Approximately \$160,000 is awarded annually to local service organizations.

Radio 11 WBAL is the sponsor of a program called "Kids Campaign." This program works to improve the quality of life for children in Maryland whose families are not able to afford basic needs such as warm coats, eyeglasses, and shoes. Kids Campaign initiatives include summer camp experience for hundreds of poor and disadvantaged children; alcohol-free/drug after-prom parties; and Magic Me, a program for at-risk juveniles, which pairs them with elderly people in nursing homes. Twice a year, WBAL asks for donations through a direct mail campaign as well as an annual Christmas-time, on-air donation drive. As a result, the station has been able to provide gifts to every young person in Maryland State institutions during the holidays. The station also forwards letters to Santa so that many families can receive food and toys through Operation Santa Claus.

Companies with limited resources and a small employee base may want to consider a collaborative approach with other organizations and businesses. One such initiative through WBAL is the Coats for Kids campaign, a project that works to improve the lives of children in Baltimore. Radio 11 listeners donate good, used coats to the program by sending them to participating dry cleaners in the metropolitan Baltimore area. The dry cleaners clean and repair the coat if needed. The Maryland Air National Guard collects the clothes and distributes them to Baltimore City or Baltimore County fire stations. The people in the community can then go to the fire station and choose a coat. The companies that are in partnership with WBAL Radio Kids Campaign are: The Maryland Dry Cleaners Association, Baltimore City and County Fire Departments, and the Non-Commissioned Officers Academy Graduates Association, Chapter 94 of the Air National Guard.

Some organizations may not have the time and resources to conduct such a large campaign. Those organizations can become involved on a smaller scale through initiatives in their "business neighborhoods."

Many small businesses and organizations get involved in their community through the sponsorship of youth athletics, reading and good grade incentive programs, food kitchens and shelters, and other programs in constant need of volunteers. Small local businesses in the Baltimore suburb of Catonsville collaboratively help to support the local high school's all night after prom party, as well as "little league" sports activities throughout the year.

Ways your business can impact your community

Using your company's expertise, you can offer assistance to nonprofit family support and children's support organizations, child and dependent care facilities, and schools. The types of services that are needed include help with accounting, business plans, marketing, and legal advice. Another way companies can assist local organizations is by donating old but usable equipment, such as computers, printers, telephones, and furnishings.

Improve the quality of dependent care

There are many ways that employers can help to improve the quality of dependent care. A tax-deductible investment of less than \$500 will pay the cost of training for a child care professional. Employers can support their employees who have dependent care needs by recognizing child care providers, parents, and guardians for their commitment and dedication to quality care for children during *Week of the Working Parent* or *Month of the Young Child*.

Baltimore Gas and Electric Company (BGE), through its foundation, recently awarded funding to Maryland Committee for Children to implement a program called the Maryland Model for School Readiness. This project is conducted in partnership with the Maryland State Department of Education, Villa Julie College, and the Governor's Office of Children, Youth and Families. The program offers training on school readiness to 50 child care professionals. The goal is to help children gain the skills they need to be ready to learn when they reach elementary school. Child care providers receive guidance in assessing children's development through observation. They receive technical assistance in helping them set up their educational environment to provide opportunities for learning experiences. The program assists child care providers by paying for college credits and staff substitutes. Upon completion of this program the participants receive four college credits. This is the first time in the United States that a State Department of Education has partnered with an early childhood agency to bring training on school readiness to child care professionals.

Assist in public education

Parents' involvement in a child's education is vital. Many businesses realize how important it is for parents to attend programs at their child's school allowing time off so parents can participate in class trips, academic activities, and school conferences. Many companies also provide time during the workday for employees to volunteer in local schools, and to participate in mentoring programs in schools and community centers. Companies are also involved in sponsoring fund-raising activities for local schools for needed equipment and supplies.

Volunteer in the community

Having representation from your organization on the board of a local non-profit service agency or citizen commission will help to strengthen or develop public/private partnerships in serving the needs of the community. Employers can give employees time off to volunteer in local schools, adult care facilities, homeless shelters, etc.; as well as recognize employees who volunteer. Even the smallest of companies can slow down production for just one day to offer a "Day of Caring" to a local organization needing help with painting, inside and outside maintenance, or any other project on the "to-do" list.

Get involved with local agencies

Many businesses or organizations want to help but may not know where to start. Contact your local Commissions on Children and Families or the Corporate Volunteer Council of Central Maryland at 410-465-8974 to learn more about current needs and specific initiatives in your community or throughout the state. A listing of the statewide Child Care Resource & Referral Centers can be found in this toolkit.

Benefits

It is encouraging to know that mentoring and investments in early childhood programs, family support systems, and schools can and do pay off. Employers are beginning to understand that investing in children and youth will help ensure a productive workforce tomorrow. Giving back to the community:

- will enhance your company's public image;
- will improve your employees' morale;
- will improve your employees' loyalty;
- will improve productivity; and
- will have a broad impact on your community.

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